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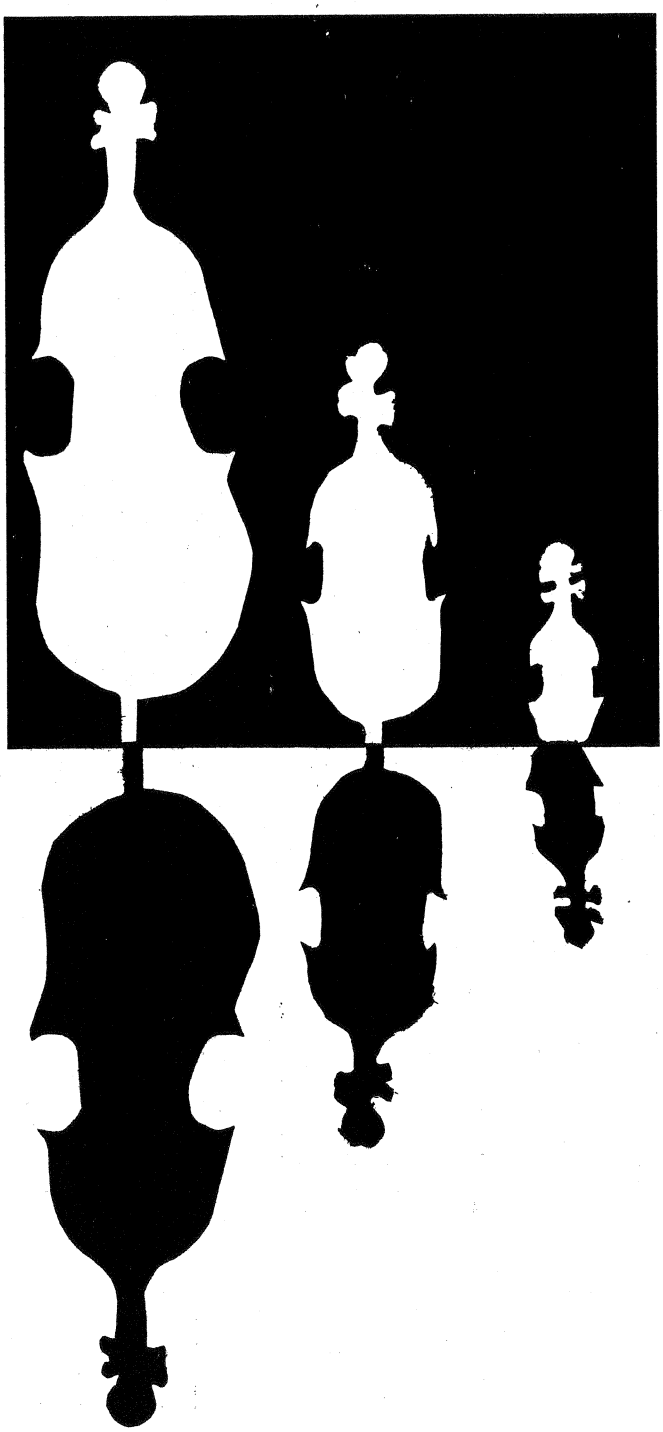

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# Dancing Music: Movement and Inquiry in a Sculpture Class

By Matthew Thibeault

*"It's not just stepping, it's thinking and holding notes out. Sort of like Dancing Music, not dancing to music."*

A student of mine from last summer wrote the opening quote, a description of Eurhythmics activities. I was teaching a sculpture class at a residential camp, fresh from Carnegie Mellon's Dalcroze Institute. Activities in Eurhythmics were included as an exploration for my students as well as myself. I had decided to pursue further training in Eurhythmics after having wonderful experiences as an undergraduate but a challenging time presenting similar experiences to my own elementary school students. I often felt like a boat lost at sea – my students could move expressively to music, but where was I trying to take them with this? Why did these exercises matter? Just as a billy goat is not a rabbi just because it has a beard, I did not feel myself to be a Eurhythmics teacher simply because my students engaged in games of beat and meter with tennis balls.

My own concerns have much to do with our understanding of the ways that movement is important for teaching and learning. How does it shape human experience? Can movement and music help us to think about three-dimensional works of art? Such inquiries invite other interesting discussions, all closely tied to the question "What happens when we 'look' at a work of art?" I do not wish to complicate matters. However, I do believe that serious consideration of questions such as these is essential to successful teaching. In questioning commonly held conceptions of movement's role in aesthetic experience, I hope to better understand some of the ways that movement experiences are powerful for my students and myself.

This essay examines four ideas that help clarify aesthetic experience but which are often neglected and deserve special consideration.

### Three Weeks at Camp: the Setting and the Experiences

Nine students, enrolled in Three-Dimensional Art, along with an undergraduate teaching assistant and myself, met each weekday morning for one hour and fifteen minutes. The students ranged from fifth through tenth grade, a typical range for this camp's "cultural" courses. Some had an art background, but only two had previous sculpting experience. The teaching assistant was a college sophomore art major with extensive painting and sculpting experience. I had taken many art courses in high school, including a sculpture class, and had since worked occasionally in jewelry and clay.

On Thursday and Friday of the first week, class was held in a dance room with a piano. Explaining to the students only that I use movement in my teaching and wanted to try some activities with them, the class participated in Eurhythmics experiences for approximately one half-hour. I played the piano and included simple walking to a beat, an interrupted walking canon, stepping the bass while clapping the treble, and some circle activities such as clapping a pattern around and across the circle. Following these activities, the class partnered up. Within each pair, one partner improvised a statue with his/her body that the other recreated within a phrase structure improvised by me at the piano. Finally, the students worked in wire for the remaining forty-five minutes of the class period, with a suggestion that they construct human wire forms. For homework, I had them write about that day's experiences with movement. After reading their responses, I discussed Dalcroze Eurhythmics with them and answered their questions as to why I studied it, what I wanted to learn, etc. The group's sculptures, movements, and comments provided the material for the following explorations.

### Four Important Considerations in Asking, "What Happens When We 'Look' at Art?"

**1. Seeing beyond looking: We construct our experiences in concert with the world**

Emile Jaques-Dalcroze's work and method, through association with Swiss psychologist Edouard Claparède, was informed by then-current psychological theories and research (Spector, 1990). I imagine that if Jaques-Dalcroze were working today he would be enthusiastic about contemporary constructivist thinkers and would most likely find that their ideas help refine his own. Simply stated, constructivists posit, "...in sum, human knowledge – whether it be the bodies of public knowledge known as the various disciplines, or the cognitive structures of individual knowers or learners – is constructed." (Phillips, 1995, p. 5). Implied here is that learning requires active participation; that thinking is often social and distributed across a group, and that education is best conceived of in educationally progressive terms. It also follows that knowledge is not simply absorbed, but that students shape and construct what they know in

transaction between their mind and body and the world around them. Process is prominent alongside product.

Two thinkers often invoked by constructivists, John Dewey and Nelson Goodman, present this view wonderfully in the arts. Particularly in **Art as Experience**, (1934/1980) Dewey shows that experience is an active, meaning-making endeavor. Both the artist and the perceiver are involved in composing their experiences with an art product – in any medium. Dewey states that "For to perceive, a beholder must create his own experience" (p. 54). Nelson Goodman, who writes in response to the common notion that art perception is a passive activity, echoes Dewey's thoughts.

*I maintain, on the contrary, that we have to read the painting as well as the poem, and that aesthetic experience is dynamic rather than static. It involves making delicate discriminations and discerning subtle relationships, identifying symbol systems and characters within these systems and what these characters denote and exemplify, interpreting works and reorganizing the world in terms of works and works in terms of the world. Much of our experience and many of our skills are brought to bear and may be transformed by the encounter. The aesthetic 'attitude' is restless, searching, testing – is less attitude than action: creation and re-creation (Goodman, 1968, p. 5).*

Goodman's perspective illuminates a conception of how meaning is made in a manner that many Dalcroze teachers might find exciting and validating. Movement gives us unique ways to inquire into works. When we move to music, we hear it in a way that is qualitatively different. There are physical echoes of sounds; we attend to shape, tension, or dynamics in a manner rooted in our bodies. We move along to the arch of a phrase and understand it in a different, and I would argue richer, way. We notice what we know or are able to access in a work, and movement gives us alternative ways to know – to actively compose and construct experiences. The quality of these experiences is dependent upon the knowledge we bring to them as well as the manner in which we interact with works of art. Thus, experiences with art require work that, although partly receptive, is far from passive. We think with all of our body.

**2. Time is involved in important ways in shaping human experience**

When we think about looking at a sculpture or a painting, we often fail to consider the role that is played by time. Many may think that we simply look at a painting and see it in a manner analogous to a camera snapping a photograph. Of course, a painting does not physically move or change in interesting ways over time. But we do. Paintings often have a structure that invites being viewed in a certain sequence. Our eyes wander from space to space, following a line or point or gesture. We change our position in relation to the painting – stepping closer to examine details, standing to one side or another as we test vantage points. In this way, a perceptual sequence through time is an inseparable part of the experience that a person has with a painting. Time and attention are more flexible in interacting with Guernica than with Symphonie Fantastique, but each work is enjoyed in a manner that is situated in time in important ways. Because we are temporal beings, temporal aspects of experiencing art have significant consequences.

The quality of our engagement with a piece across time is also important. For Dewey, continuous interaction with a work is critical to understanding and having an aesthetic experience.

*The eye and the visual apparatus may be intact; the object may be physically there, the cathedral of Notre Dame, or Rembrandt's portrait of Hendrickje Stoffels. In some bald sense, the latter may be "seen." They may be looked at, possibly recognized and have their correct names attached. But for lack of continuous interaction between the total organism and the objects, they are not perceived, certainly not esthetically. A crowd of visitors steered through a picture gallery by a guide, with attention called here and there to some high point, does not perceive; only by accident is there even interest in seeing a picture for the sake of subject matter vividly recalled (Dewey, 1934/1980, p. 54).*

Sculpture also often suggests temporal elements. Size, materials, and placement of a work all can imply expressive temporal aspects to the perceptive viewer. But the viewer must work with the sculpture to achieve these understandings. Writing about his sculpture of an old man sitting on the ground, leaning against a stump and reading a book, one student in my class remarked, "This is a good piece to look at while listening to slow music. I know that sounds pretty weird, but it's true. Maybe it's just me, but it definitely works. You see it in a totally different perspective. The music slows your thinking to a point of relaxation, thus bringing you to the level of the piece's pace." I find it remarkable that this student realized that his piece could have a tempo, and even suggested a strategy for aiding or funding the perception of his work. Yet another student remarked on an expressive and movement-oriented gesture of a different piece, "I like how it doesn't focus on the way the flame looks standing still in a sort of freeze-frame. Instead, it focuses on the motion and sort of grace of the fire."

**3. Experience integrates all of the senses in ways we don't often acknowledge**

I placed the word "look" in quotes earlier because we don't use only our eyes when we look. The very use of the word "look" limits us: we do not merely look, we perceive in a broad sense; we experience, we construct, we create. In the view of many psychologists and educational thinkers, particularly those working in the field of situated cognition, the use of our senses is integrated and embedded in our environment (Anderson, et. al. 2000; Bredo, 1994, 1997; and for the classic statement, Dewey, 1896). When we look with our eyes, the visual information we receive is colored by information we get from our ears, our sense of smell and touch and even taste. The environment we are situated in also changes what we think about a piece. Our experiences with and attitude toward the sounds of the Eroica symphony change depending on what constitutes the world around us when we encounter it. Are we sitting in a concert hall or coffeehouse? Perhaps listening to a CD at home? Are we killing time during a rush hour commute? In the quote about the sitting sculpture in the preceding paragraph, my student tapped into a way that listening to a particular kind of music aided a richer perceptual experience with his sculpture.

For Jaques-Dalcroze, movement was also essential for understanding music because much of our understanding of music is kinesthetic in origin. It is interesting to note that he chose to emphasize "feel" instead "hear" when he said, "A Bach fugue is a dead letter to those who are unable to feel in themselves the conflicts produced by the counterpoint, and the sense of peace and harmony evoked by the synergies" (Jaques-Dalcroze, 1921/1980, p. 102).

**4. Movement affords fresh and unique views of the world**

The students in Three Dimensional Art worked on compositions in wire following their Eurhythmics experiences. I chose wire because I felt that the continuous and fluid nature of the medium, as opposed to clay or found objects, would be helpful in transferring their experiences with their own bodies into their works. In the essays they wrote for homework, one student remarked on his perceptions of transfer and the use of movement for composition, saying "Another thing it did was allow us expression through the pose. When we did the statues, we could see what something looked like before we did the actual sculpture, so we could sort of preview what the sculpture would look like, and more importantly, what feelings and emotions it would express to the viewer." Movement here allowed the student to externalize his thinking, just as movement to music allows a teacher potential access to a listener's experience with music.

Movement allows us not only to think about the world in new ways; movement itself is a way of knowing, a kind of knowledge irreducible to other forms. Movement can, and I believe should, be understood as a way of knowing as independent and unique as such mediums as writing, music and painting. The student above notes that movement not only allowed him to see how things would look; gesture also allowed him to experience feelings and emotions that would have expressive qualities for the viewer.

Elliot Eisner unpacks this notion in a wonderful essay. He argues persuasively for a more generous conception of literacy, one that includes many ways of knowing. For Eisner, movement should be seen as one of the ways that students come to know the world. In advocating a broader conception that includes forms in addition to traditional language, he says:

*Just where are these other meaning systems to be found? Upon reflection it becomes clear that they are nearby: Meaning is conveyed in the visual forms we call art, architecture, film, and video. It emerges in the patterned sound we call music. It appears first in human experience in movement, then gesture, then dance. It emerges in the ways in which social relationships are constructed through the rites and rituals that represent and express our highest aspirations and deepest fears. Becoming literate, in the broad sense, means learning how to access in a meaningful way the forms of life that these meaning systems make possible. What we ought to be developing in our schools is not simply a narrow array of skills limited to a restrictive range of meaning systems, but a spectrum of literacies that will enable students to participate in, enjoy, and find meaning in the major forms through which meaning has been constituted. We need a conception of multiple literacies to serve as a vision of what our schools should seek to achieve (Eisner, 1998, p. 12).*

### Some Implications for Educators

By now, I hope to have shown several ways that movement can enhance aesthetic experience, based upon notions of what happens when we encounter a work of art, which in turn springs from a conception of what it means to be alive in the world. Eurhythmic experiences allow for flexible purposing of goals and objectives from all standpoints and by all participants. Eurhythmics, when well taught, also allows students opportunities for self-exploration and self-expression that are potentially germane to other areas in their lives. My students enjoyed engaging in movement experiences in sculpture class, and I believe that they benefited from this. Their movement-based inquiries enabled them to clearly see and feel the temporal and bodily

aspects of sculpture in addition to experiencing time, space, and energy as expressive elements within a static piece. They enjoyed using gesture in their finished works and with their bodies in movement. I am always impressed by and proud of the work my students engage in, but I think that the exploratory nature of this class stimulated particularly interesting observations and promoted risk-taking that paid off in a surprising number of instances.

The ideas I have outlined, stemming from my considerations of Dalcroze Eurhythmics, can enhance the ways in which we understand how people think, see, and interpret the world with the entirety of the body. Once we come to see learning and experience in these ways, we are compelled to consider the use of the body and the senses in the exploration and creation of knowledge. In profound ways, thinking is the result of organic processes that must be taken into account by teachers and educational planners. Researchers are noting the ways that new understandings of learning and experience can enlighten practice (Frego, 2001). My students last summer demonstrated this to me continually through their works and their words, in the ways they moved and the ways that their movements changed me.

Finally, I believe that our students often have nuanced but underappreciated conceptions of the way art and movement function in our lives. Recall the opening quote, "Dancing Music, not dancing to music." This is a very thoughtful description of Dalcroze Eurhythmics, especially from someone who had not previously had it explained to him. Allowing our students the intellectual freedom to explore and create, as well as to discuss with us what they feel they are learning and accomplishing through their work, can help us not only to better live as artistic producers and perceivers; this invitation to share our lives with our students can help us to live in a manner infused with the knowledge and experiences that art brings, living life itself in an artistic manner.

Good Eurhythmics teaching, I believe, is rooted in a vision of what it means to encounter and be transformed by the aesthetic. It depends only slightly upon a repertoire of skills and activities. It is more about what we notice and respond to when we work with our students than the strategies and tactics we employ. Eurhythmics teachers can and do bring their unique perceptions to many areas, not only those concerned with music. It is not only what they do – it is who they are. I further believe that in order to make the experiences we bring to our students most valuable, we should carefully consider our reasons for presenting these students with experiences as well as what our long-term goals for our work are.

I close with words of two of my summer camp students; taken from an essay they wrote in response to the question "When is Art?"

*And often we take art for granted. We don't think of the clouds or stars or trees as art. Well, maybe we should. Art is all around us. It's everywhere. You just have to open up your eyes and see it.*

*Perhaps art is an illusion, and everything we see and feel is false. Perhaps art is my telescope and my source for deciphering human nature and the complexity of the mind. Perhaps art can help us conclude things about ourselves, and express ways of dealing with our problems. Perhaps art is a window of opportunity that will always exist.*

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